If you have visited the Fairgrounds in Miles City recently you may have noticed a major change brought about by the replacement of the nearly 100-year-old livestock barns with a new 20,000 square foot livestock pavilion. The pavilion is an open-walled structure which provides the most comfortable conditions for livestock during the summer. This project has been spearheaded by the Custer County Extension office, Custer County 4-H and the newly formed non-profit organization “Friends of the Fairgrounds.”

The project idea began in 2014 when rain during the fair caused flooding in the livestock barns, prompting the early removal of the livestock from the grounds during the fair. Custer County Extension Agents garnered the support of the 4-H Leaders Council and formed a building committee. Once the concept drawings were approved, the fundraising effort commenced in summer of 2015. The project received great financial support from individuals, 4-H, FFA, community clubs and businesses in the area along with a $117,500 grant from the Montana Tourism department to reach the $370,000 that was required to bring the building to completion. Notable activities in the fundraising effort included a challenge by the 4-H clubs to each raise $50 per member to donate to the pavilion. A brand board project raised over $50,000 by providing local ranchers the opportunity to have their brand permanently displayed in the building for $500 per brand.

The pavilion houses livestock during the Eastern Montana Fair, the Montana Ram Sale, Bucking Horse Sale and will serve as a covered venue for community events such as the Miles City Brew Fest.
Custer County Agriculture at a Glance

Custer County represents an extremely diverse agricultural production system spread across almost 2.5 million acres. Land ownership division is roughly 78% private and 22% state and federal; the county contains a relatively high percentage of private land compared to some other Montana counties. The majority of land use in Custer County is agriculture land or rangeland. The variety of ownership and a mixed land use of irrigated and dryland crops and ranching provides diverse economic opportunities for local producers, businesses, and recreationists. Ranking fourteenth in the state the county agricultural commodity sales in 2012 were a combined total of $109 million with $88 million in livestock sales and $21 million in crop sales. Most people in the county aware Custer County is beef country, ranking third in the state for numbers of cattle and calves at 111,800. The county also ranks second in the state in production of corn for silage in support of our beef cattle industry. Custer County raises a large quantity of livestock on the excellent rangeland. Pasture comprises 91.9% of the total land mass of the county. There are over 400 individual farms/ranches in Custer County, with an average market value of products sold of $250,000 per farm.

Custer County Extension supports agriculture in the area through a broad offering of educational and service programs. These programs include pesticide licensing and education, forage, water and soil testing, feed ration development, facilitating experts to present educational programs, weed and plant identification and management, on farm visits for problem solving and many other Extension programs as needs arise.

Custer County 4-H

Custer County has a very active 4-H program consisting of 163 members and 48 leaders. There has been an increase in Shooting Sports and Livestock Judging this past year with 4-H members attending numerous events across the state. The 4-H teen leaders continue to volunteer and help with many programs and functions. With the help of the members, leaders and parents we were able to make our new livestock pavilion a reality. Custer County 4-H is fortunate to have strong support within the community.
Family and Consumer Programming in Custer County

Program highlights for Family and Consumer Science in Custer County include:

- Provide Food Safety Training in a ServSafe and other venues to many age groups.
- Provide research-based nutrition classes to hundreds of school students in kindergarten through high school. The presentation includes hands-on learning to improve retention of the information.
- Teach Healthy Lifestyle Cooking Class six times per year for 25 adults. Most participants are either diabetic, pre-diabetic, or suffer from high blood pressure or high cholesterol. They learn about healthy ways to cook and try new, healthier foods they may not be familiar with.
- We provide free Montguides that contain proper procedures for food preservation such as canning, drying, pickling and freezing garden produce. The interest in food preservation is becoming more popular but can pose a real safety concern if not done correctly. One of the services we offer is testing of pressure canner dials to make sure they are accurate, assuring a safe product when pressure canning. In addition, we answer many questions concerning food preservation during late summer and fall.
- Maintain the Story Walk from Easter until Halloween, providing two storybooks each week for families to read as they walk on the Holy Rosary Healthcare walking path. The Story Walk provides physical activity for families and encourages literacy and a love of books and reading.
- Chef school provides second and third graders with the opportunity to learn to cook, learn basic nutrition and food safety as well as good manners.
- Youth prepare an entire meal with the help of Custer County 4-H teens and are encouraged to take the recipes home and prepare the meal for their family thereby encouraging the family to eat together. Families who eat together have children that do better in school, are less likely to be involved with drugs and alcohol, are more active in school activities and more likely to attend college.
- Extension and the Montana Health network teach the “Safe Sitter” babysitting course, preparing fifth and sixth graders to do child care in the community. They learn basic First Aid, CPR, discipline techniques, good business practices and age appropriate activities to keep children engaged.
- Arthritis Exercise is a twice weekly exercise program for those suffering from arthritis, as well as those that want a gentle exercise program that increases flexibility, strength, endurance and improves balance. Twenty to thirty participants take part in the 10-week sessions that are offered four times per year. Participants report greater mobility and less pain when involved in the program.
Big Sky Montana was the host location for the Annual NEAFCS conference in September 2016. The co-liaisons were Tara Andrews from Custer County and Sheila Friedrich from Sheridan County. Over 700 Extension professionals attended the conference from the United States. Many participants extended their stay to travel across the state and see Montana’s beautiful scenic diversity.

The positive tone of the conference was set by Montana State University’s President Waded Cruzado’s keynote address on the history and importance of Land-Grant universities and Extension. She also showcased MSU’s increasing enrollment and graduation rates.

A brief snow storm made the typical Montana tailgate party a unique experience for many at the conference kick off. Conference goers tried their hand at roping, branding and barrel racing, corn hole and a goal kicking contest.

States purchased a red wagon and decorated it as a float for a wagon parade. Wagons were donated to daycares and preschools in Gallatin County.

The success of this conference required the help of all of Montana’s Family and Consumer Science agents as well as many of our Agricultural Agents. This was a collaborative effort that the MSU Extension can be proud of.